DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 271 006 FL 015 771

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TITLE Oral Style Strategies in EFL Written Discourse: Implications for Teaching College Composition.
PUB DATE Apr 84
NOTE 11p.; In: Proceedings of the Annual Linguistics Conference (3rd, Irbid, Jordan, April 1-3, 1984); see FL 015 768.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Students; Discourse Analysis; *English (Second Language); Essays; Higher Education; *Language Styles; *Oral Language; Reader Text Relationship; Second Language Instruction; Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

Stylistic features that impede the efficiency of communication in writing were studied in the essays of a sophomore class in reading and essay writing in English as a second language (ESL) at Birzeit University (Israel). It was hypothesized that in ESL writing, college students apply many strategies of communication more typical of the spoken mode of language than of the written mode, an extension of the stylistic transfer made from spoken to written Arabic. A sociolinguistic method of analysis that sees the essay as a communicative event involving the writer, the reader and his or her expectation, and the message was used. Two elements in the essays were examined: (1) moments in the text at which the writer assumed that the reader possessed all the appropriate background information not provided for in the text, and (2) textual and syntactic structures more appropriate in spoken than in written language. The analysis supported the hypothesis concerning the transfer of Arabic stylistic practice to English. Two classroom procedures for helping students make the transition from spoken to written styles are proposed: that in oral language classes teachers guide students to be more topic-focused in their narratives through questioning and requests for more specific information; and that, in writing classes, teachers engage in similar, but written, dialogs to cultivate specificity. (MSE)

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ORAL STYLE STRATEGIES IN EFL WRITTEN DISCOURSE: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING COLLEGE COMPOSITION

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The two modes of language, speaking and writing, exhibit distinctive features of two strategies of communication. Speaking exhibits features of Oral Style strategies which involve face to face interaction between the speaker and the audience and the use of paralinguistic cues such as tone of the voice, intonation, prosody, facial expressions and gestures. Writing, on the other hand, exhibits features of the literate style strategies which involve decontextualization due to the separation in time and place between the writer and the readers. Thus, writing requires the use of lexicalization and complex syntactic structures to connect the propositions in the text and to provide the background information and details for the reader to enable him to ascertain the writer's intended message (Kroll 1977, Ochs 1979, Tannen 1980).

The two strategies of communication, however, are applied in both modes of the language respectively, but one genre of discourse requires a more frequent application of one strategy than the other. For instance, casual conversations and informal letters require more frequent application of oral style strategies while lectures and expository prose require more of the literate style strategies (Tannen 1980).

This paper investigates the stylistic features that impede the efficiency of communication in writing. Fifteen essays were collected from a sophomore class taking a language course for reading and essay writing at Birzeit University. These students must have taken two other language courses with heavy emphasis on the reading skills and paragraph writing. The three courses are required from all students in the University, and those who intend to major in English must obtain a minimum average of 75%.

It is my contention that inexperienced student-writers tend to extensively apply strategies of communication typical of the spoken mode of language in writing. Thus, their written products

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often have no connectives between propositions or specifications. Therefore, the reader finds it difficult to ascertain the writer's message. The extensive application of oral style strategies in writing can be attributed to transfer from Arabic conversational styles and written Arabic style.

It is also my contention that the students' knowledge of oral style strategies can be utilised in speech as well as in writing classes to facilitate the transition to literacy necessary for expository prose. I shall therefore propose two classroom procedures for the purpose of facilitating the transition to literacy at the end of this paper.

The Choice of Data

The data for this study consist of fifteen essays written by sophomore students in one language course at Birzeit University. As mentioned earlier, the course emphasizes reading skills such as skimming and scanning and essay writing. The essays collected are based on a novel required for outside reading. The novel is 'Lord of the Flies' by William Golding. The students in this class were asked to write an essay guided by the following questions and suggestions: "The actions in the novel center on three main figures - Ralph, Piggy and Jack - and you should get as clear a picture as possible of the character of each, and of the kinds of actions with which each is associated. How do these three characters interact among themselves and with the other boys? What does each of these three characters represent in terms of the novel's political message?" (Quoted from a handout given to the students).

I have selected these essays because the topic is not essentially imposed upon the students as is the case in most writing classes. The other reason for this choice is the formal nature of the essay. Since the essay is formal, it is expected to have distinct features of the literate style. Consequently, it becomes easy for the researcher to characterise any other features that are not typical of the written mode of the language.

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Although the students taken as a sample for this study are all native speakers of Arabic, my data is limited to the written English essays. The justification for the exclusion of Arabic data lies in the fact that the genre of discourse such as the essay, lectures, informal conversation, etc., determines the application of oral or literate style strategies. It is not the language used that determines the strategy.

Method of Analysis

My analysis of the data is sociolinguistically oriented. I look at the essay as a communicative event which involves the writer, the reader and his expectation as to what should go in the text and the message. Therefore, I investigate the lexical and syntactic structures in the written text that leave the burden of figuring out the missing background information and the relationship between the textual propositions to the readers. Hence, the unit of analysis is a stretch or chunk of discourse which may consist of one T-unit or of a series of T-units. A T-unit consists of one main clause and at least one subordinate clause attached to it.

Guided by the findings of research on spoken and written discourse conducted by Chafe (1978), Kroll (1977), Ochs (1979), and Tannen (1980,1981), I posit two questions as my guidelines. First, where in the text has the student-writer assumed that the reader knows all the background information not provided for in the text? Second, what textual and syntactic structures has the student-writer used that are more appropriate in the spoken language? Then, I state the stylistic feature that is more typical of spoken language, of which I give an example from the text and explain why that feature is more appropriate in spoken language. My analysis and the findings of this analysis are thus done in one step, altogether.

The following are the recurrent features of conversational style in the texts under investigation:-

1. The relationship between the propositionsin the texts is not developed. There are no connectives used to join one proposition to the other.

Example (Text No. 11, p. 1)

> "There are some boys who escaped from the war, they used to have meetings, the one who wants to speak must have the conch, this symbolizes that the boys have a sort of democracy between them, and a sort of respect to the person who is speaking...."

The propositions included in the text are: "the boys from the war", "the boys' meetings", and "the conch as a symbol of democracy." However, the text-writer assumes that the reader is capable of figuring out the relationship between the three propositions. The writer did not provide the cohesive lexical or syntactic links necessary for the reader to see the logical sequence of propositions in the text. Chafe (1980) in his study on the spoken and written language introduces the concept of "fragmentation" of ideas as a distinctive feature of spoken language; he defines "fragmentation" as "the stringing together of ideas or idea units without connectives." The text above exemplifies this phenomenon of idea fragmentation since the connectives are missing. Gumperz, Kaltman and O'Conner (in press) in an article on spoken and written language discuss thematic cohesion and point out "that elements in a text must be tied to each other (or disconnected from each other) in such a way as to signal a continuously developing theme."

2. The opening section of the written text often has a global statement irrelevant to the main thesis of the text.

Example (Text No. 2, p. 1)

> "Life without rules is nonsense, human beings can't live without rules because it arrange their relation between each other and with animals. If there are no rules, or the rules are broken by each one, the evil will increase and the destruction will be the end...."

In addition to the fact that such opening sections with such global statements shock the hyper-literate people of societies that adore the slogan "Stick to the point", they indicate that

the student-writer has come to the writing task with no clear vision of the constituent parts, which are its message, the reader and the writer. Consequently, the written products will suffer from a lack of specifications and details necessary for guiding the reader.

3. The extensive use of demonstratives like "this", "these things", etc., and other vague elements like "sort of", and "so on".

Example (Text No. 6, p. 3)

"...This represents Piggy's cupidity. This clears the operation of using rules and it is a kind of democracy...."

The use of the demonstratives in the above text implies heavy dependence upon the context or the environment of speaking or writing. Bernstein (1964), Ochs (1979) and Chafe (1980) enumerate these deictic elements as devices associated with speaking. The demonstratives used imply the writer's involvement with a projected interlocutor - someone who is in the writer's presence. Chafe (1980) identifies involvement with the context with the spoken mode of language. The experienced writer uses nominalized modifiers instead of the demonstratives.

4. Use of parallel constructions due to coordination and lack of subordination of ideas and structures.

Example (Text No. 7, p. 1)

"...Ralph was worried about the boys, he always thinks in a way of rescuing them, he thought that he was responsible for them, he used to treat them good...."

"...Jack was strong, he was the chief of the hunters, he inforces his rules by commanding them, his first aim was to have meat to eat, he was always showing them ... (illegible word) and he was the stronger one of them...."

The student-writers produce coordinated structures because they don't feel pressed to develop the relations between the propositions for the reader. They assume that the semantic relationship between one proposition and the other is quite obvious. The absence of the subordinate clause deprives the text of the causal

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relations between its proposition. Sacks (1972) gives a classic example of the stringing together of propositions without accounting for the implied semantic and pragmatic relations through cohesive links. His example is:

"The baby cried. The mommy picked it up." The hearer uses the context, lexical knowledge and a general principle of interpretation to make sense of the sequence.

Ochs (1979) treats parallel structures as an exemplification of conversational style, and points out:

"that conjunction is more common than subordination in this type of discourse..."

5. Repetition and the shift to narration without an explicit connection between the narrative text and the preceding proposition.

Example (Text No. 6, p. 3)

"...When Piggy went to get his glasses from Jack he took the conch with him to clear that he has the right, but here was the end of the conch which represented the rules, and it was the end of Piggy who respected the rules and for the interest of the boys. Therefore, the end of struggled conch was when Piggy went to Jack to get his glasses...."

The text has a combination of features that are not typical of written language. The predominant feature is repetition. The "conch" as a symbol of rules and laws gets repeated several times in the text. Barbarah Cogh (1980) in her analysis of a selection of standard Arabic texts explores repetition as a distinctive feature of written Arabic texts. She claims that repetition serves the function of making the main point of the text. The Arabic writer, she states, repeats the most important point instead of explaining and accounting for it. She further claims that repetition in Arabic texts originally comes from the Koran. In the Koran, the truth value of sentences can't be questioned, and thus repetition is one discourse function in Koranic texts. In other cultures, she adds, the important point is well made only if the writer explains it and elaborates on it to convince the reader.

The other feature in the preceding text is the shift to narration. Narration occurs in both modes of the language, speaking and writing. However, in these texts narration includes reference to action and activities rather than states and objects. The student-writers of these texts get involved with the events of the narrative as if they were participants in a conversation. They do not offer an analysis of the main point of the story. Moreover, they do not explicitly state the reason for placing the narrative text immediately after a certain statement or proposition in the written text. Such propositions made before the narrative texts are virtually conclusions rather than topic sentences. Thus, the reader of these texts gets the impression that the writer is interested in narrating a story instead of making a point to support his thesis statement which he made earlier.

Implications and Recommendations

In order for the student-writer to avoid the extensive application of conversational or oral style strategies in formal academic writing, the teachers should be familiar with the writing process as an act of communication involving the writer, the reader and the messages. Furthermore, the teachers should be aware of the distinctive features of literate style strategies and oral style strategies and the domains of their application.

Before I propose two classroom procedures for the writing teacher, I want to call attention to a few points to be taken into account in the writing class. First, I recommend that the student-writers be trained to write in the less formal styles of writing in preparation for the written essay. The students acquire their spoken language through styles beginning with the least formal styles of speaking and ending with the most formal styles. Shuy (1981) reminds us of the need to allow the student-writer to go through the natural writing acquisition stages, and to practice writing in less formal styles and then move on to the essay writing. The school essay, he points out, limits the student-writer to only one type of reader, usually the teacher and to a limited range of language functions such as explaining, defining,

comparing, etc. Thus, the other language functions like complaining, requesting, apologizing, protesting, etc., are neglected. If the students are allowed to practice writing in the less formal styles, then the targeted readers will vary because the language functions accomplished vary. Thus, the students will be pressed to include all possible details and do the necessary elaborations on the topics in the texts since they do not share the same background information with all those readers. The problem with the school essay is that the students assume that the reader, the teacher in this case, will figure out the intended message since he shares a great deal of his knowledge with the student. Moreover, since the students are not required to write in the less formal styles of writing, they do not develop the competence of distinguishing between the lexical and syntactic elements appropriate in writing and those that are appropriate in speaking. They tend to use the same register in the two modes of language with no sensitivity to the stylistic variation in language.

Building on the above mentioned principles of guiding the student-writer to make the transition from orality to literacy, I propose two classroom procedures. First, in the speech class, the students should be asked to narrate stories of personal interest to the class, and while the teacher is listening, he should interrupt the narrator by asking for more specific information or requesting more details and for the use of lexical and syntactic elements to lessen the amount of dependence on the context or the environment of the class. For instance, if the student uses demonstratives like "this", "these things", the teacher should ask him to use lexical items instead. If the student does not elaborate on a certain topic and attempts to move on to another topic, the teacher should ask questions that press for elaboration on the first topic. Thus, the student will become more topic-focused in his narrative.

The other classroom procedure is applicable to the writing class. The teacher in this class can begin a dialogue in writing with his students. Instead of correcting the mechanics of writing and the content directly, the teacher can make his comments in the

form of questions which will elicit the necessary details and comments from the student-writer. The teacher asks questions in writing about the text and the student rewrites the same text, but this time with more specifications and details.

This process should continue for the whole semester until the student becomes aware of the significance of elaboration and of the inclusion of all details regardless of who the reader is. This procedure may be time-consuming, but it is worthwhile trying since it can produce rewarding results.

In conclusion, the traditional emphasis put on the form of the written products needs to be supplemented by a sociolinguistically-oriented analysis of the essay as a communicative process rather than a static product. Essays that are error free in the traditional sense are not necessarily communicative.

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